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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a rationale and introduction to three innovative techniques which provide initial counseling experiences to trainees in the helping professions. The development of a cooperative program with the drama department to train and utilize drama students as coached clients is described as the first technique. The second technique is presented as a review by trainees of experienced counselors' taped interviews to help them develop more accurate and comprehensive perceptions of an actual counseling encounter. The third alternative technique is delineated in terms of training counselors in the use of mental imagery for self-directed practice and review of counseling interviews in an imaginary context. Current programs teaching counseling interactions for enrollees are reviewed in light of how trainee role-playing has traditionally been the primary method used to provide these experiences. The alternative techniques presented are designed to provide additional quantity and quality to the experiential aspects of training programs with minimal additional costs and personnel requirements. (Author)

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PROVIDING SUPPLEMENTAL COUNSELING EXPERIENCES: ALTERNATIVES TO ROLE-PLAYING

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PROVIDING SUPPLEMENTAL COUNSELING EXPERIENCES: ALTERNATIVES TO ROLE-PLAYING

INTRODUCTION

"Experience is the best teacher". This is such a commonly accepted statement that we rarely give it a second thought. Experience provides necessary behavioral practice and opportunities to experiment with new ideas, techniques and skills. Experience increases self-confidence by offering a degree of assurance about what the future will bring based on situational similarities with the past. Experiences provide the foundation which is necessary to begin individual development and growth.

Acquiring appropriate forms of experience for providing these benefits to people in the helping professions has always been a difficult problem for educators. A critical question is, who should trainees practice on while they are considered lacking in skills and experience? People with real problems may be hurt by unskilled or poorly skilled neophyte helpers. Educators are continually seeking to find ways for providing the realistic situations necessary to gain experience while at the same time not endangering the welfare of those people being used for practice.

This paper suggests three methods for providing trainees with experience that should aid in the development of their helping skills. None of these methods can be expected to produce exactly the same developmental results in a trainee as an actual helping

situation. However, they can provide similar types of experiential and practice benefits which promote understanding, skill development and confidence in trainees. These methods are not meant as training cure-alls. They are meant for use as supplemental methods which can extend and broaden training practices or provide for additional experiental needs not presently being met.

Utilizing Drama Students

The use of creative dramatics and particularly drama students to play client roles is the first experiential method offered for examination. When drama is utilized in the classroom to promote student learning, it has clearly proven to be an effective instructional aid (Cottrell, 1975). These structural dramatic situations can be used to shape and implement specific experiences for individuals needing exposure to real situations (Barry, 1970). Collum (1977) has stressed the point that empathic capabilities which appear critical to helping can be enhanced by utilization of these techniques. The direct and indirect benefits of dramatic techniques make them appear to be valuable additions to a counselor training program.

Development of a cooperative program with the drama or theatre department for enlisting the aid of drama students is the foundation of this method. The drama students would periodically act as coached clients in interview situations with counselor trainees.

This concept offers several major advantages over the traditional use of counselor trainees themselves to role-play clients. One obvious advantage is that the client is not known by the counselor, thereby making the situation appear more realistic. Also, since drama students are not enrolled in a counseling program, they will be less likely to try and influence the trend of the session or the work of the counselor. Drama students' opinions of the counselor's work following an interview will be more like the opinions of actual clients who would also have no counseling background. Perhaps the most important advantage, however, is that drama students are trained specifically to act out life-like roles and therefore, they should perform those acts better than counselor trainees.

Practical application of this technique involves providing drama students with information about the background of the proposed client, basic problems involved and the manner in which the client reacts and communicates. Client problems can be designed to include any variety of symptomatic behaviors and attitudes which the drama students feel able to identify with and/or portray in an extemporaneous format. The authors have found that this type of training is most effectively accomplished when the drama students are included in the process of character design. Involvement at this level allows for better understanding of the character and eventually a more spontaneous and realistic interpretation of the character.

After drama student training is completed, the flexibility of the process becomes its major benefit. A wide variety of interview situations can be simulated as they become appropriate at different stages of helper training. Initial interviews could be structured to give trainees concentrated experience in forming early rapport building and listening skills. As trainees progress, interview situations involving middle and termination phases of counseling can similarly be designed to meet these changing circumstances. Having trainees use different counseling techniques, providing various client situations and having clients (drama students) convey their perceptions of the counselor and situation to the trainee are a few of the seemingly limitless possibilities open to these dramatic techniques.

One common concern of educators seeking to use this type of program is the problem of seeking assistance from the drama department. The fact is that this type of cooperative venture should benefit the drama department and its students as much as the counselor education department. A variety of drama courses, particularly for beginning students, are continually seeking innovative ways to provide students with experience in character design and extemporaneous portrayal of characters. This cooperative program can provide these courses with meaningful and flexible activities to help meet their needs.

Utilizing Experienced Counselor Interview Tapes

A second supplementary experiential technique involves exposing trainees to interview tapes done by experienced counselors. Erkedal (1975), has demonstrated that the use of even brief videotaped presentations by a symbolic role model can be a highly effective means of increasing students' understanding of the initial counseling relationship. More specifically, actual counseling skills of trainees appear to be directly improved by observing their supervisors in an actual counseling situation (Ronnestad, 1977). It would appear that the modeling and feedback effects of watching and reviewing the counseling efforts of an accepted model are beneficial to the development of counseling skills.

Two basic types of benefits can be expected from using experienced counselor tapes. The modeling effect is the most obvious benefit. Here trainees observe accepted techniques and operations which they can emulate to whatever degree they feel is appropriate. If the experienced counselor tape is also done by the trainee's supervisor, the exposure to the supervisor's skills will also help both parties to better understand and relate to each other's conceptual framework. Instead of the usual one-way observation of the trainee, this method allows for a closer relationship to develop and can lead to a more effective transfer of ideas.

The simplest use of the tapes is to have trainees listen to

them just for the purpose of observing an appropriate counseling model. Although evaluation of the tapes in terms of comments, reports, etc., can be required, the basic purpose is simply to observe a quality counseling session. This exposure should provide a picture of what occurs in an effective counseling session, what the counselor can do and how the client will respond to effective communication. The trainees are thus exposed to an effective interview which they might otherwise never experience until and unless they become effective helpers.

A second method for utilizing experienced counselor tapes is for the supervisor and trainee to review them in the same way they would review trainees'tapes. The process of reviewing only the trainees' personal tapes results in a situation where few if any comparisons can be drawn between the type and quality of the trainee's skills and other observable skill criteria. Under these conditions trainees can easily lose sight of the practical quality of their skills and become discouraged at their inability to meet unattainable theoretical levels. Review of experienced counselor tapes should allow for the observing and setting of more practical and achievable goals which are more in line with actual human potential.

Utilizing Mental Practice

The third mode for gaining experience is termed mental practice. In the present context, mental practice refers to a conscious process

in which individuals develop, observe and rehearse realistic situations using their imagination as the primary medium. This process, in which an individual's mental imagery is the prime variable, appears to be advantageous to successful mnemonic device usage (Peterson & Jacob, 1978), performance on thinking tasks (Durndell & Wethrick, 1976) and the development of various athletic skills (Oxedine, 1969). These research samples exemplify the wide variety of mental and physical activities which appear to be affected by this imagery variable (Hazler, 1979).

One particular study, which provided the emphasis for much of the material presented here, found that mental practice of a counseling situation increased the self-confidence of counselors prior to their initial observed interview. Mental practice also improved the neophyte counselors' ability to distinguish between varied levels of written empathic counselor responses. Finally, these counselors' ability to evaluate their own performance following a counseling interview was improved over the group not provided the mental practice training (Hazler, 1979). Although research into the mechanical processes of mental practice may not yet be conclusive, it is apparent that whatever the dynamics, the use of mental practice is a valuable learning tool.

The recognition given to mental practice by research lends credibility to this activity. However, the amount of informal use of the concept by nearly everyone may be of equal significance in determining its current practical value.

Statement: "I could see it so clearly in my mind."

Statement: "I can imagine how she felt."

Statement: "Use your imagination to picture this."

We make and hear this type of comment regularly. Virtually no one considers the mechanical operations involved in this mental process. Instead, it is used so commonly that its process is generally taken for granted as people assume it can and will be used by everyone.

The actual experience of mental practice can take either of two basic formats or some combination of these formats. The first format is termed "directed mental practice", in which the participant is led through an imaginary experience either by another individual or a recording. Trainees simply follow directions telling them what to imagine, when and in what manner. Systematic desensitization is a current counseling technique that utilizes this practice extensively in the treatment of anxiety. The other form of mental practice is of a non-directed nature where participants develop all problems, personalities, situational directions and communication using their own initiative. Although both methods have specific benefits, their combination is usually most beneficial when initially developing mental practice skills. This approach allows trainees to progressively reduce their dependence on someone else for directions as their ability to direct themselves increases.

One method of combining directed and non-directed practice

was utilized to provide a form of experience to neophyte counselors prior to their first actual interview (Hazler, 1979). These counselors had the concept of mental practice and its values explained to them as a first step. They were then taught a few basic relaxation techniques to reduce interference with their thought processes and concentration. Four audio tape recordings were later given to the subjects. These tapes contained client comments, narrator comments directing the counselor to perform specific mental practice activities, and pauses for the counselors to respond or perform the assigned or chosen mental practice tasks. Narrator comments decreased over the four tapes so that counselors were increasingly given responsibility for self-selection of the mental practice activities. This training was designed to develop individuals who could and would utilize their imaginations to mentally practice counceling situations on their own.

In counseling, the use of mental practice appears to provide numerous experiential values similar to those involved in role-playing and the two previously described supplemental experiences. It also provided advantages which are not comparably available through other techniques. Perhaps the prime advantage is that mental practice requires little monetary and personnel support. No other individual is necessary for practice which can therefore take place whenever and wherever it is most convenient. Time, place and personnel needs have been reduced to a minimum. Also, because no one else needs to be present, the exercise

remains non-threatening to the counselors. This is of particular benefit to fearful counselors newly learning their skills.

The flexibility and freedom offered by this technique offers unique advantages. Mental practice users may take any role they choose, including counselor, client or observer. Additionally, they may take these roles whenever and to whatever extent they choose. They can make statements, observe results or change statements to observe different results. Most importantly the use of this technique, unlike others, does not tie the participant to any certain role, situation or time frame and allows maximum freedom for experimentation.

SUMMARY

This paper provided an introduction to three techniques which can be used as means to provide experience to trainees in the counseling field. The three methods include training drama students to react as realistic clients, using experienced counselor tapes to provide trainees with exposure to successful experiences and the use of mental practice as a means of individually experiencing and reviewing counseling interviews. These methods have been found to promote gains similar to those associated with first hand experiences. However, they are presented here not as replacements for real-life experiences but as cash and time effective methods for supplementing these real-life experiences.

Educators and their programs are currently being bombarded with requirements to reduce costs and manpower consumption to whatever degree possible. How to react to these needs while maintaining a quality program is the critical question faced. The methods offered for consideration in this paper will help provide valuable counseling experiences to trainees in ways that will benefit both the trainee and the program. They are inexpensive, require limited manpower, provide some answers to the ethical problems involved in having trainees work with real clients, and still provide many of the benefits available though more traditional experiential components of programs.

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